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ABSTRACT

Many rural school districts struggling with declining elementary school enrollments will soon face the more complex problems of declining high school enrollment. School districts with only one high school do not have the option of consolidation and must find innovative solutions to the problem of maintaining educational quality with dwindling resources. Interdistrict sharing, introduced in Iowa in 1979, allows a district to offer a comprehensive educational program even though it lacks a comprehensive school. Sharing strategies include pooling students in a single location, bringing students and teachers together across large distances through technological communication links, and rotating teachers, administrators, equipment, or facilities. School administrators could consider interdistrict cooperation when (1) teachers need the opportunity to learn new teaching methods; (2) students need wider vocational experiences; (3) the school needs qualified counselors or specialists; or (4) the school is unable to offer advanced courses or special gifted or handicapped programs. A 16-step plan for successful development of cooperative strategies involves: (1) a needs assessment; (2) discussions among all interested parties; (3) use of a third-party consultant and legal counsel; (4) widespread publicity accentuating the positive; and (5) sufficient time and opportunities for school personnel and community members from both districts to air their views and resolve difficulties. (SV)

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A Survival Lesson for Small Schools: The Iowa Experience

by
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Introduction

One reality confronting many rural communities is declining enrollment. School administrators, boards of education, and interested individuals within the communities are becoming frantic in their efforts to meet raising state academic mandates with resources that are tied to student enrollment. This situation is further exacerbated by declining land values. This article will examine what some rural school districts are doing to meet the challenge of providing a quality education with limited resources.

Preliminary Steps

Many school districts are closing their elementary schools, or they will be forced to look at alternative ways to operate their schools. Few communities, however, have planned to deal with an even greater problem, which is the high school enrollment decline that will arrive as smaller classes in elementary grades move on through the school system.

Communities must plan now for enrollment problems of the future. Since specialization and technical expertise at the high school level is more complex than the elementary school, secondary administrators need to recognize an urgency for school districts with a single high school, a category that includes roughly three out of four school districts in the United States.

The solution to declining enrollment is not a simple one because not all school districts will be impacted in the same way. Bussard (1981) pointed out that not all school districts are experiencing decline in the high school. There is wide variation at national and regional levels.

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National figures record the peak year of public school enrollment, grades 9 through 12, as 1976. A 25% decrease from that peak is projected by 1989. For the regions that have declining enrollment (especially the Northeast and North-Central regions of the United States) the numbers might be as high as 40%.

This decline will change the high school, for school districts with one high school will not be able to offer the programs they do now. Having only one high school, those school districts do not have the option of closing and consolidating their secondary school as they do at the elementary level. Yet, declining enrollment in secondary schools requires fundamental reassessment of the purpose of the high school and the role of the high school in the community.

While implications of decline and change may be different for large and small districts, common fears exist. People in a district whose high school has a population of 2,000 can project a loss of 500 to 1,000 students. They will be just as baffled as those whose enrollment will drop from 1,000 to 700 or 500 or 350.

Many strategies and approaches are open to districts in making the high school fill the role that the community wants it to, with fewer students. Some of these strategies are obvious while others are not, but it is important to understand all of the options.

Inter-District Sharing

Inter-district sharing is viewed by many as a solution whose time has arrived. As one superintendent phrased it: "Sharing is a means to enable us to offer a comprehensive educational program, even if we can't have a comprehensive school" (Stinard, 1983, p. 10).

Writings on inter-district sharing are limited. This concern is illustrated in a unique table entitled, "A Compendium of Advice to School Managers as They Adjust to Decline," in which only two of the forty-two documents addressed inter-district sharing (Stinard, 1983).

Inter-district sharing is a relatively new alternative for rural school districts. In 1979, inter-district sharing was introduced in the State of Iowa with the implementation of School Law 280.15, which stated that any two or more public school districts could jointly employ and share the services of any school personnel, or acquire and share the use of classrooms, laboratories, equipment and facilities. Any classes made available to students in this manner would be considered as complying with the requirements relating to the maintenance of the twelve grades of a school.

In Stinard's (1983) four year assessment of a seven county area in East Central, Iowa, he found that the percentage of school districts who entered into an inter-district sharing program increased from 23% to 49%. Administrators in approximately one-half of these school districts stated that they felt the need to do something different to improve their educational environment.

All sharing programs do not look alike. Sharing strategies can be very different. Some schools might pool students in a single location, move teachers and administrators among schools, bring specialized facilities or equipment to schools on a rotating basis, or bring students and teachers together across large distances through technological communication links. These cooperative ventures are utilized in varying degrees according to a particular school's needs. That need can range from sharing a single course or activity to a school sending all of their students from one or more grade

levels to another district for all or a large portion of the educational program. This allows schools to maintain their own school boards and sports identities.

Questions to Ask

While many questions may be asked, some are more important than others when deciding to participate in a sharing program. School administrators have engaged in sharing programs for a number of reasons. Inter-district sharing programs have been the answer to many of these questions that have confronted administrators. These important questions are: (1) Do the teachers need an opportunity to learn new teaching methods? (2) Would the school like to offer more vocational experiences for students? (3) Does the school need qualified counselors or specialists? (4) Is the school unable to offer students the opportunity to take two or three years of science, math, foreign language, or English? (5) Is the school capable of offering special programs for the gifted and handicapped students? Where the response to any of these questions is "yes," sharing services might be the answer.

After the "Right" Questions are Asked: What Next?

For rural school districts to survive, there is a need to look at how a district can build success into a cooperative or sharing program. The following are 16 steps that have been field tested and found to be a school district's best formula for achieving success, if they choose the concept of sharing courses, students or services. The survival lesson is as follows:

1. Conduct a needs (existence) assessment.
2. Initiate discussions with Board of Education.
3. Initiate discussions with school districts who would be acceptable to to a sharing agreement.

4. Hire a third party consultant (preferably team) at shared expense between districts.
5. (Optional) Establish a citizen committee(s).
6. Retain legal counsel.
7. Hold discussions with principals and teacher association representative(s) or committee.
8. Allow dates and times for interested individuals (parents, students, faculty and staff, community citizens, etc.) to visit proposed sharing site.
9. Communicate the reason for being. Be positive, the negative will already be there.
10. Hold an open joint board meeting when final report(s) are given by consultants and citizen's committee, if one is used.
11. Allow time for individual boards of education and administrations to discuss results of sharing study.
12. Hold a public hearing in each school district affected by proposed sharing agreement.
13. Hold a joint board meeting between affected districts to identify and resolve any problem areas and solidify agreement.
14. Have legal counsel create a contractual agreement between districts.
15. Establish a controlling board made up of an equal number of board members from affected districts.
16. Develop a planning and implementation program. Now the work begins!

Sharing Possibilities

The following are examples of types of inter-district sharing that are in use today within rural areas of the United States.

1. Administrative and teacher sharing: Two or more districts share administrators and/or teachers in order to lower personnel cost. Within these personnel, financial arrangements are usually equalized on a percentage sharing basis.
2. Sharing Facilities: Two or more districts share one set of facilities, either on an alternating basis or at the same time. In this type of sharing program, an example might be that all 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students from district A attend school in a building in a neighboring school district B. While the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade students from the neighboring district B attend school in a building in school district A.
3. Activities Sharing: Two or more school districts combine their student bodies to field athletic teams, bands, or offer activities which might not otherwise be offered. These activities include sports as well as cheerleading and student newspaper involvement.
4. Technology Sharing: Two or more districts would share curricular offerings using satellite communications. Other types of technology that can assist in a sharing program might include microcomputer, slow scan, fiberoptic, and low power television capability. By sharing resources, several users can benefit at totally different sites than other users of the system. This type of communication system has gained and will continue to gain popularity with rural schools who are trying to reach a higher level of educational effectiveness.

Conclusion

Problems such as declining enrollment, a decline in classes being offered, and a lack of qualified staff to teach classes are only a few of the immediate concerns facing rural schools today. However, sharing indeed may be of value to many schools who are looking for creative ways to maintain or improve an educational climate. Sharing may also be viewed by many small school districts as a last resort to the alternative that many communities continually resist--consolidation.

For those school districts who are forward thinking and are searching for creative and innovative ways to meet the challenges of declining enrollment and declining dollars, developing an inter-district sharing program could be an answer. For school districts who perceive their state legislature mandating more stringent educational standards and financial incentives for larger student populations, sharing could be a possibility. For those school districts who are trying to maintain an existing program and continue to exist in states where legislatures are mandating "bigger is better," may find some hope in developing a sharing program.

Whatever the reasons for becoming involved with a sharing program, the most crucial question needs to be asked and answered. That question is, "What is this program going to do for our students?" Sharing can offer students a much larger and a well rounded education without taking away the small school atmosphere.

Is sharing a cure-all for what is ailing school districts? Probably not! For those school districts that are rooted in tradition, a sharing proposal may be unacceptable.

Students are not going to be educated as students were educated fifty years ago. Rural communities need to maintain as many traditions as possible but not at the expense of hindering young people in acquiring knowledge to be able to compete for jobs in the 21st century. And on this basis, rural educators and communities need to look at alternative approaches to <u>better</u> educate their students.

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